

# **The Power of Humility**

**by**

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“It’s not exactly like I’m an expert on humility—nor could I admit it if I were”, wrote Carol Bonomo, author of *Humble Pie* in which she creatively exegetes St. Benedict’s Ladder of Humility.

There are more descriptive, thought provoking one liners on humility than any one person’s mind can contain. You know the kind, an adage that your brain wants to focus on, mull over and perhaps, even implement; but quickly, the next, equally provocative, saying comes across the screen. And they are written by such impressive, historically proven people. You hear the name and think, even before you hear the wisdom to follow, ‘Oh, I’ll bet this is going to be good’.

American philosopher & theologian of the 1700’s Jonathan Edwards wrote about humility “The Pleasures of humility are really the most refined, inward, and exquisite delights in the world.”

20<sup>th</sup> century, Anglican cleric John Stott, “At every stage of our Christian development and in every sphere of our Christian discipleship, pride is the greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend.”

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in the first century, “Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues; hence, in the soul in which this virtue does not exist there cannot be any other virtue except in mere appearance.”

Hindu Prince Gautama Siddarta, the founder of Buddhism circa 500BC includes humility in an impressive list, “Reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude and hearing the Dhamma, this is the best good luck.”

The Prophet Muhammad, “Humility and courtesy are acts of piety.”

Confucius, “Humility is the solid foundation of all virtues.”

English cleric Charles Caleb Colton gives a balanced perspective on Humility, “He that places himself neither higher nor lower than he ought to do, exercises the truest humility.”

And it is not only the religious discipline that extols the concept of humility.

Legal Scholar John Seldon, “Humility is a virtue all preach, none practice; and yet everyone is content to hear.”

English Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *The Devil's Thoughts*, “And the Devil did grin, for his darling sin / Is pride that apes humility”.

One year after D Day General Dwight Eisenhower said in public speech, “Humility must always be the portion of any man who receives acclaim earned in the blood of his followers and sacrifices of his friends.” Repeat

Irish Poet Thomas Moore in *The Loves of the Angels*, “Humility, that low, sweet root / From which all heavenly virtues shoot.”

Finally, mystery writer Helen Nielsen sums up the challenge of applying humility, “Humility,” she writes, “is like underwear, essential, but indecent if it shows.” Obviously, she did not live in the day of teens with baggy, saggy britches and exposed boxers.

One sure conclusion we can draw from this impressive list of Humility quotes is that humility, at one time or another, has grabbed the attention of every prominent thinker. So as we attempt to sort out what humility is and what it isn't we need to consult another prominent name – Webster. In his third

college addition he defines humility as: 1. Having or showing a consciousness of one's defects or shortcomings; not proud; not self-assertive; modest. 2. Low in condition, rank, or position; lowly; unpretentious [a humble home].

It's telling that the word comes from the Latin root *Humilis* meaning low, small, slight, akin to a similar Latin word *humus*, soil or earth. The next time someone maligns you by calling you "lower than dirt" you can respond by thanking them for noticing your humility.

The dictionary defines humility as someone who is modest, who lacks pretense, someone who does not believe that he or she is superior to others. The ancillary definition includes: having a lowly opinion of oneself, meekness."

The early Romans understood this word in its fullest, probably because they coined it and in their heyday of world conquest they were anything but humble. It is said that to maintain humility the Romans had a person specially appointed to accompany and remind a returning hero of a triumph, "remember thou art mortal", in case the person should forget.

Often the best way to understand a term is to fully understand what it is not. It's clear that humility is not arrogant pride, vanity or conceit. Humility does not build one up or knock one down. It actually doesn't address or think of oneself at all. Humility is not about me...or you. It's about everyone else. We don't know when we have it, because when we look at ourselves, it's gone.

Humility is not self, but other focused – always. It's not something that a humble person does, it is who they are. In the 3 "C's" of a successful employee – competence, character & compatibility – this is the character part.

If humility then is really “the foundation of all virtues” as both St. Augustine and Confucius and many others have said, are there any detractors of this high view of being humble?

We might as well ask, are we humans or is the Pope Catholic?

Some philosophers have not been impressed with humility. Aristotle leaves it out of his catalogue of virtues, while both David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche are critical of this trait.

Hume, for example, says: “Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve no manner of purpose;...we justly,...place them in the catalogue of vices.”

Jump from the ancient to the present and we find Tania Kotsos, the founder and author of Mind Your Reality. In her article “Humility and Pride – Two Misguided Virtues”, she focuses on the extremes of each. She labels humility as “the quality of having a low view of one’s importance, a lowliness of mind or sense of unworthiness”; and pride as “a high opinion of oneself, an unreasonable conceit of one’s own superiority.” “On one hand”, she writes, “humility deflates your sense of self and binds you to your strengths, while pride over-inflates it and binds you to your weaknesses”.

She calls for a law of rhythm that swings like a pendulum between the two, humbling the proud and making the humble proud. You can also buy gift vouchers to her online seminars for \$125.00 a pop.

All detractors are answered by the practical and highly successful David Packard, the co-founder of Hewlett-Packard who epitomizes humility by saying, “You shouldn’t gloat about anything you’ve done;

you ought to keep going and find something better to do.” He is mirrored by fellow CEO of Enbridge who espouses two leadership attributes: determination and humility. He asserts that greatness comes from humility and being at times, self-effacing.

The misconception that humility haters may have is that of confusing humility with timidity. Humility is not clothing ourselves in an attitude of self-abasement or self-denigration. Humility is all about maintaining our pride about who we are, about our achievements, about our worth – but without arrogance – it is the antithesis of hubris, that excessive, arrogant pride which often leads to the derailment of some corporate heroes, as it does with the downfall of the tragic hero in Greek drama. It’s about a quiet confidence without the need for a flashy selling of our wares. It’s about being content to let others discover the layers of our talents without having to boast about them. It’s a lack of arrogance, not a lack of aggressiveness in the pursuit of achievement.

Humility is not about deprivation. Humility is about more, not less. A humble heart gives more, has more room, sees more good, and is more generous. This sounds like something powerful and worthy of a Quest paper.

If we’ve sufficiently defined what humility is and what it is not and convinced you that it is a positive character trait, let’s move on to the title given me, The Power of Humility. Does humility encase power? If so, what does it look like?

One more quote. This time from Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali poet from India who became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. He wrote, “We come nearest to the great when we are great in humility.” Greatness presupposes energy, even power.

The endless array of books, articles and quotes extolling the benefits of humility may be succinctly summed up in the word “freedom”. Humility offers its owner complete freedom from the desire to impress, to be right, or to get ahead. Frustrations and losses have less impact on a humble ego and a humble person confidently receives opportunity to grow, improve, and reject society’s labels. A humble life results in contentment, patience, forgiveness, and compassion. Humility is freedom to be, freedom to be you without bending to others pressures or striving for self-promotion.

- Freedom to accept one’s own individual limitations. Humble people realize their understanding is limited and embrace it. As a result, they wisely look for answers outside of themselves.
- Freedom to appreciate others. A humble person appreciates the fact that the world does not revolve around him or her. And they accept their position as just a tiny piece in the giant puzzle.
- Freedom to respect others and their opinions. Just because an opinion is different doesn’t mean it is wrong. It may be wrong...and it may be right...and it is far better to humbly begin a dialogue than rush to condemnation.
- Freedom to listen more. And speak less. Humility allows one to spend more time understanding... and less time being understood.

- Freedom to help others and promote others. Joy is not found in being right and arriving at the top. Instead, joy is found in helping others grow and succeed. Humility realizes that in those cases, both win.

Humility freely releases untold power within us. A humble life results in contentment, patience, forgiveness and compassion. When our ego is checked at the door, we enter with an admirable energy that enables our cause to be accomplished. As a result the term servant-leader was coined. Leaders who conduct themselves with humility are human beings first, great visionaries second and then consistently get the job done.

Humility has nothing to prove and everything to offer. The power of humility not only affects corporate or societal level, but is also powerfully personal. In fact one of the many books on humility is a paperback by Charles L. Whitfield, co-authored by Barbara H. Whitfield, Russell Park and Jeneane Prevatt called *The Power of Humility: Choosing Peace over Conflict in Relationships*. One thankful reviewer describes the benefit of this read as enabling him to develop a free and liberating life, while truly helping others from a place of personal power.

Humility is the act of being modest, reverential; even politely submissive. It is the opposite of aggression, arrogance, pride and vanity. And on the surface, it appears to empty its holder of all power. But on the contrary, it grants enormous power to its owner and minimizes the power of the aggressor.

Perhaps some of you are aware of the war being fought on the Republic of Congo's eastern border with Rwanda. The rebel group M23, who some say are sponsored by Rwanda, was in control of a small number of Congolese villages in which there are organized Christian churches. In order to maintain



control the rebels imprisoned many men including the pastors and church leaders. No local or foreign pleading moved the jailers; until last summer the women of the village employed a tactic that has been effective in other difficult places. The women marched on the jail naked. Even though these rebels are well known for the intimidating weapon of rape, for them to publically look on a naked woman is forbidden and extremely embarrassing. Through peaceful, humble means the women got their men released by turning the other cheek, so to speak.

It's the application of the biblical Proverb. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Prov. 15:1. It's also the proven tactic of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.

There are powerful examples of humility in every vocation.

From the world of sports. For years, David Robinson was the heart and soul of the San Antonio Spurs basketball team. He was the star center and face of the franchise. Yet when the club made the youngster Tim Duncan its offensive go-to guy, Robinson didn't pout, sulk or call for either he or Duncan to be traded. The Admiral which was his nickname due to his naval service and graduation from the naval academy accepted his reduced role with grace. He had the humble freedom to proactively encourage Duncan to take the reins and helped the Spurs win two NBA championships.

From the religious side. Islam lauds the humble example of the Prophet Mohammed who "used to milk the sheep, sew and patch his own garments, go to the market and buy his own things, sit and eat with his servants, initiate greetings with others, and act as though he was like any other one of his companions, joining them in whatever they were doing."

Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz lifts up Moses as the Jewish illustration of the most humble man who ever lived. Moses, he writes, “had acquired more insights into the workings of God and of the universe on all levels than anyone before or after him.”

The Platform Sutra of Buddhism tells a story about how the Sixth Patriarch, Master Hui Neng, of the Chinese Zen Sect reprimanded a follower for his arrogant attitude. That follower felt self-conceited about his knowledge of a major Buddhist sutra and knowingly or unknowingly kept his head above the ground while bowing to the master. At that point the master gave him a lecture that his lack of humility suggested that having a great knowledge of the sutra fettered his mind rather than liberating it.

Naturally Christians hold up the founder Jesus Christ as the epitome of humility; who said, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head," Luke 9:58 and “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Luke 18:22.

From the military. Not only were the Roman victors kept humble by the accompanying caller, “remember thou art mortal”, in addition, a passage from the US Navy SEAL creed best describes the importance of military humility and self-sacrifice:

“My loyalty to Country and Team is beyond reproach. I humbly serve as a guardian to my fellow Americans always ready to defend those who are unable to defend themselves. I do not advertise the nature of my work, nor seek recognition for my actions. I voluntarily accept the inherent hazards of my profession, placing the welfare and security of others before my own.”

You've heard as often as I have the honored military, law enforcement or first responder offer, "I was only doing my job."

Even in the egocentric world of entertainment we can find inspiring examples of humility. Nik Wallenda has become the most-watched high wire artist and daredevil in the world. His two most recent feats were seen by a billion people across the world. In 2012 Wallenda walked a tightrope across Niagara Falls and in 2013 he became the first person to high-wire walk across the Grand Canyon. He seems to know how tempting pride and popularity are, so after the huge crowds and media fade away Wallenda engages in a simple, humbling discipline; he walks where the crowds have just stood and quietly picks up trash. He recently wrote, "My purpose is simply to help clean up after myself. The huge crowd left a great deal of trash behind, and I feel compelled to pitch in. Besides, after an inordinate amount of attention I sought and received, I need to keep myself grounded...I do it because it's a way to keep from tripping."

In our Western, success driven society probably the most quoted examples of humility come from the world of business and leadership, largely from the books by Jim Collins. From his book, *Good to Great*, to sequel, *How The Mighty Fall*, his teams of researchers are hard to argue with. Collins examined companies that went from good to great by sustaining 15-year cumulative stock returns at or below the general stock market, and after a transition point, cumulative returns at least three times the market over the next 15 years. Among the characteristics that distinguished these successful companies from others is that they all had a Level 5 leader. A Level One Leader is a Highly Capable Leader. Level Two is a Contributing Team member. Level Three is a Competent Manager. Level Four is an Effective Leader. And Level 5 is the Executive; a leader who builds enduring greatness through a

paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. Level Five leaders direct their ego away from themselves to the larger goal of leading their company to greatness.

Collins open his chapter on Level Five leaders with the story of Darwin E. Smith who in 1971 became the CEO of Kimberly-Clark, then a stodgy old paper company whose stock had fallen 36 percent behind the general market over the previous twenty years. During his twenty year term Smith created a stunning transformation, turning Kimberly-Clark into the leading paper-based consumer products company in the world. Kimberly-Clark generated stock returns 4.1 times the general market, handily beating its direct rivals Scott Paper and Procter & Gamble, even outperforming companies like Coca-Cola, Hewlett-Packard, 3M and General Electric.

Yet few people know anything about Darwin Smith. A man who carried no airs of self-importance. Smith found his favorite companionship among the plumbers and electricians and spent his vacations rumbling around his Wisconsin farm in the cab of a backhoe, digging holes and moving rocks. He never cultivated hero status or executive celebrity fame. Collins then goes on to describe a few of the masterful management moves that Smith initiated and concludes this example of the humble Level Five Leader with this sentence. "In retirement, Smith reflected on his exceptional performance, saying simply, 'I never stopped trying to become qualified for the job.'"

While examples abound a few contemporary thinkers have begun to note the growing absence of Humility. For example Claes Ryn has observed that "the humility characteristic of the older kind of American is becoming rare in leading political circles." Jonathan Sacks, a leading rabbi in England, has called humility the "orphaned virtue of our age."

As evidence to this fact Kari Konkola notes in her chapter *Have We Lost Humility* that three recent reference books, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* and *the Encyclopedia of Christian Theology* all absent an entry for “humility” or “pride”. A common trend, she says, is that humility is passed over in total silence. The icing on the cake for Konkola is that William Bennett’s *Book of Virtues* neglects a mention of “humility” and none of the reviewers of *Book of Virtues* points out the absence. Contrast this with the fact that popular seventeenth century religious texts show humility to have been one of the most important moral ideals of the time.

For some reason the ever present roadblocks to humility have become larger obstacles to recent generations. There are specific behaviors and character traits that impede a person’s ability to be humble:

Pride is the arch enemy of humility. The basic problem with pride is that it’s focused on self rather than others. Issues of pride must be eliminated before one can strive for humility.

Insecurity opposes humility because of an unhealthy self-centeredness. Insecure people lack confidence because they spend too much time examining themselves.

Overconfidence, derived from the same self-centeredness as insecurity, is a quality that leads a person directly away from humility.

Selfishness; as long as you strive to meet your own needs and desires before having concern for others, humility will be a distant dream.

Should we be convinced that humility is an admirable characteristic that might give us a powerful freedom to be ourselves, serve others and even achieve success, how might one foster this trait?

St Benedict of Nursia circa 500AD was contemplating the same question as he was responsible to teach and train young monks in his monastery. He came up with the first twelve step program. St. Benedict's Ladder of Humility and people have been using it, adapting it and finding great success in it ever since.

1. Be aware of God's Presence
2. Love doing God's Will rather than our own.
3. Be obedient and submissive to our superior
4. Be obedient even in difficulties and hardships
5. Confess sins to our spiritual father, priest
6. Be content with our circumstances
7. I am the least of my brothers and sisters
8. Follow rules and traditions (of church, monastery, convent, family)
9. Refrain from excessive speech
10. Refrain from raucous laughter

11. Speak as is appropriate

12. Keep your body in humble bearing

If twelve steps are too many in Islam, Yahya Ederer sees that there are two ways to increase our humility with God and His creation. First, come to know God and be thankful for the fact that everything comes by his blessing. And, second, take account of ourselves and always remind ourselves of our weaknesses and shortcomings and that we are just creatures made from dust who will return to dust.

Simpler yet, Buddhism, boils the whole process to the single concept of “emptiness”; emptying oneself of the illusory ego. The quintessence of humility is finally manifested in the practitioner’s realization that he is nobody or nothing.

From the purely secular sense, humility requires a sacrifice of pride and a paradigm switch away from self-centeredness. In a world that encourages self-indulgence and material wealth, humility may be challenging to acquire. The habits of prayer, meditation, contemplation, solitude, self-denial, sacrificial giving and volunteerism may be employed. And, the benefits including peace, wisdom, healthier relationships and the respect of others certainly outweighs the sacrifices.

The simplest way to develop and employ humility in one’s life is the age old method, see and do. That is notice anyone who demonstrates humility and do the same. I have become aware over my life span

that the most honest, uninhibited, demonstrative teachers of love, compassion and, yes, humility, are special needs kids.

I offer this final illustration. The fourth grade gym class was playing a game called "balloon stomp." A balloon was tied to every child's leg, and the object of the game was to pop everyone else's balloon while protecting one's own. The last person with an intact balloon would win.

The children entered into the spirit of the game with vigor. Balloons were relentlessly targeted and destroyed. A few of the children clung to the sidelines like wallflowers at a middle school dance, but their balloons were doomed just the same. The entire battle was over in a matter of seconds, leaving only one balloon inflated. Its owner was, of course, the most disliked kid in the class. It's hard to really win at a game like balloon stomp. In order to complete your mission, you have to be pushy, rude and offensive.

The next class to come into the gym was a class of special needs kids. They were given the same explanation as the first class, and the signal to begin was given. But the game proceeded very differently. Perhaps the instructions were given too quickly for children with learning disabilities to grasp them. The one idea that got through was that the balloons were supposed to be popped. So it was the balloons, not the other players that were viewed as enemies. Instead of fighting each other, they began helping each other pop balloons. One little girl knelt down and held her balloon carefully in place, like a holder for a field goal kicker. A little boy stomped it flat. Then he knelt down and held his balloon for her. It went on like this for several minutes until all the balloons were vanquished, and everybody cheered. Everybody won.



Everyone cheered and everyone won. May we go and do likewise.

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